

The Best Treasures Are Found In Henley

by The Kapok Kid

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Summary: The Kapok Kid gives Johnny Nicholls a name and address in South East England before he dies. After the Kid's death, Johnny goes to Henley. What will he find there? Takes place during WW II. No knowledge of the original novel is needed to understand this story. COMPLETE.

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****Disclaimer:**** _HMS Ulysses is the property of Alistair MacLean and his publishers. I own nothing. _

****Author's note:**** _This is my first fan fiction. You need not have read the novel to understand this story. Any constructive criticism would be appreciated. I am not from Britain, so the geography, architecture, fauna and flora have been researched on the internet. Please let me know if there are any inconsistencies. Reviews are much appreciated._

* * *

><p>Surgeon-Lieutenant Johnny Nicholls stepped on to the platform at Henley with a grimace. He struggled with his crutches for a moment, blinking in the sudden sunlight, soaking in the sultry heat of the day.<p>

A young porter, noticing his difficulty, hurried up and proceeded to drag the tattered suitcase out of the train compartment and onto the luggage trolley. Johnny followed him through the station and into the compound outside, wincing as his crutches squeaked on the bland concrete floor of the waiting hall.

"I suppose you were in the war, Sir?" The boy's tone held no insignificant amount of awe.

"Yes, in the Navy." Johnny was in no mood for conversation, preferring instead to gather his resolve for the forthcoming encounter. He felt his coat pocket for the letter he had read countless times, running his fingers along its familiar creases.

The porter did not sense Johnny's mood; he gazed at the man, eyes widening in recognition. "Oh, I saw your picture in the paper, Sir. You were aboard the _H.M.S Ulysses_. Surgeon -Lef-f-tinant Johnny Nich-cholls, one of the six survivors." He stuttered over the name; the words almost a whisper, heavy with admiration.

The boy summoned a taxi, placed the suitcase on the back seat, and helped Johnny in beside it. His eyes grew round at the generous tip placed in his palm. Johnny smiled wryly to himself; he could well imagine the boy regaling his comrades with the story of having met Surgeon- Lef-f-tinant Johnny Nich-cholls. _The Kapok Kid should have been here, _Johnny thought with a pang. His ebullient friend had always enjoyed meeting people, and would surely have had a kind word, if not some anecdote from their time aboard the _Ulysses_ for this eager young boy.

o.O.o

The taxi wound its way through the dusty streets, past the church of St. Mary with its sixteenth century tower, and stopped outside a green wall with a modest iron gate. Johnny hauled himself and his luggage out of the taxi, and hobbled in through the open gate and up the gravel drive.

He drew the letter out of his coat pocket, clutched it firmly in his fist and pressed his finger on the doorbell. The jangling echoes reached his ears as he stared at the garden with its colourful flowerbeds; dahlias and marigolds and rhododendrons threatening to spill on to the lawn, at the row of laburnums set against the further wall, and at the spreading chestnut tree on which hung a long, low swing. The viridians, chromes and summer yellows were strange to Johnny's eyes after the monochrome greys and blues of the arctic hellhole. A breeze pulled at his unruly curls. He suddenly felt strange, standing here on a perfectly normal doorstep of a perfectly normal house, as though he did not belong here, as though he should be back on board the _Ulysses_, _or join his comrades in their watery grave in the arctic.

The opening door shook Johnny from his thoughts. "Surgeon-Lieutenant Johnny Nicholls? We've been expecting you." Her voice was warm, with a Spanish lilt. Her brown eyes took in his appearance; the hollowed cheeks, purple bruises under the eyes, the way his left ankle was swollen beneath the bandages, his threadbare coat and tattered suitcase. Her gaze lingered for a moment on the creased paper in his fist, and the lines in her middle-aged face softened. She turned, and led him along a passage into the sitting room at the back of the house.

She likes me, Johnny thought in surprise. He was used to pity, sympathy and even admiration, but it had been a long time since someone had simply _liked_ him. He settled himself with some trouble on the couch, thankful for the soft cushions that eased his aching muscles.

"My daughter is out at the moment, she will be back soon. Would you like some tea while you wait? I am sure you are tired after your journey." The brown eyes were filled with an unfamiliar emotion.

"Yes please, Mrs. Hollingsberry. I would be very grateful."

He looked around the sitting room while she was busy in the kitchen. The room was small and cosy, with well-worn couches and armchairs, cheerful cushions and throws. Sunny landscapes in watercolours hung on the walls. The back lawn was visible beyond the French windows; it was larger than the front garden, but landscaped in a similar way. Johnny glimpsed a small Austin parked by the wall. It was a far throw from the large elegant mansion, tennis courts and crimson Bugatti that the Kapok Kid, the Lieutenant Honourable Andrew Carpenter, Andy or Vasco, as he was known to Johnny, his best friend, frequented on his days off duty.

Johnny wondered what drew the Kid to this place, to these people. It was alien in its very normality; again the strange feeling of not-belonging took hold of him. He resisted the temptation to turn tail and run. He could well imagine what Andy would have to say about that._

"_The man has no spirit, no flame of bravery or adventure burns within him." _The Kid would say, shaking his head mournfully. "_Here, Johnny boy, I've got plenty of guts to spare, would you like to borrow some for that poor old dormouse-heart of yours?"_ He would solemnly pat his quilted tunic just above the right breast pocket, which had a J embroidered in gold. Then he would probably kick Johnny in the backside and advise him to get on with it.

Johnny resisted the strange urge to laugh. He had not felt like smiling, let alone laughing since his return from the convoy. _Oh Andy, the things you do to me,_ he murmured to himself.

Opening out the letter still held in his fist, he flicked his eyes over the same phrases for what felt like the hundredth time. "Of course, Andrew's best friend" terrible shock to us would be very welcome stay at our house This reply to his own tentative letter written a day after his release from headquarters had been both a relief and a source of trepidation. Relief at the offer of a place to stay for a few days " his only home was a derelict cottage in Scotland; he had no remaining family; and trepidation at the thought of finally seeing the girl who had occupied so many of the thoughts and dreams of his best friend's short life, and who was now " God willing " to be his.

The mother of the subject of his thoughts bustled in at that moment with a tray of sweet smelling tea and shortbread biscuits. Johnny smiled appreciatively at them " the bulk of his recent sustenance was corned beef sandwiches at twelve hour intervals in the sick bay, or at action stations aboard ship. He felt her eyes on him once more as he sat back with his cup of tea, and flushed involuntarily. He looked far older than his twenty five years warranted, he knew, with his gaunt features, overlong dark curls and stiff, aching limbs.

"Eat, please, my dear", Mrs. Hollingsberry said gently. "Dinner will not be ready until much later, and you look half-starved. My daughter

will be back soon and I am sure you will want to speak to her."

He watched her watch him sip his tea, lines of concern etched into her forehead, her eyes crinkling at the corners. It was an unfamiliar expression to him. It was unlikely that they would want a tired, embittered war veteran, old before his years, to marry their beautiful young daughter.

"You are very welcome here, you know" Mrs. Hollingsberry said suddenly, as though she could discern his thoughts. "Andrew was a dear boy, and he spoke often about you. We are very happy to have you here, Lieutenant."

"Please, call me Johnny" he murmured, taken aback by the sincerity in her tone. Her brown eyes were tender when he looked up and he was suddenly enlightened as to what the strange expression was.

_Mother. _It was motherly concern for a sick, injured boy, he realised. Not the public sympathy or pity he dealt with so dispassionately everyday. She had been a mother to his best friend, and she would now be one to him, if he so wished. She looked up startled at this revelation, and saw understanding in her eyes.

The front door opened just then, and Mrs. Hollingsberry left the room, saying over her shoulder as she went, "My daughter is here, and I will send her in to you."

Johnny straightened the hem of his shirt and his scuffed trousers, wishing he could straighten his nerves out just as easily.

"_Don't be a soppy mess, Johnny boy" _he heard the Kid's aristocratic drawl in his head._ "Your old Scots stubbornness will get you through this all right. If you muck up now, you and I will be having words in heaven when you get here!"_

In heaven. Of course, the Kapok Kid was sure he'd end up in heaven. Fighting down the impulse to laugh once more, Johnny turned as the door opened.

_-o.O.o- _

Juanita.

His favourite name. That was Johnny's first thought. His second was that his best friend had superlative taste in women "in this woman. Johnny was reserved when it came to women, but he noticed her slender form, the wave in her dark hair and the firm set of her shoulders in the split second it took her to walk into the room and close the door behind her.

"Surgeon-Lieutenant Johnny Nicholls?" The voice was low and lilted. The outstretched hand was long-fingered and smooth.

"Juanita". He smiled, and it came naturally now, as he raised his eyes to her brown ones. "Call me Johnny, please."

"Johnny, then." She smiled as well, an infectious, mischievous smile. Johnny noticed that she was wearing a green dress, precisely as the Kid had always told him. _Suits her right down to the ground, too_, Johnny thought.

"Andrew told me much about you. You and he were friends, I understand?"

"Best friends. We met when I was in my last year at medical college; he was brought into hospital with a broken arm. We met again on board the _Ulysses; _him as navigator, me as assistant surgeon. He was a good friend â€" the best."

Suddenly, his throat felt tight. He had borne the horrors of the convoy with courage that would put many better men to shame, but here in this safe and cheerful home, talking about his dead best friend was excruciating.

Juanita watched as his face paled, and made the suggestion to sit out in the front garden. Johnny readily acquiesced and followed her along the passage, vaguely aware of the smell of chicken and potatoes wafting from the kitchen. She helped him settle on the swing attached to the chestnut tree, laid the crutches at his feet on the grass, and settled herself next to him.

"He was my best friend, too, you know" she said quietly. "We were friends long before I began to love him. He was always in love with me, I think. He loved to come here, when he was on leave. We would play tennis, or walk on the Thames and visit the old man and his dog at the Grey Goose. We'd come back for dinner, most days. He loved Mama's roast potatoes. Daddy and he would tinker with the Austin sometimes, or he would bring the Bugatti and they would work on that."

She turned to him, her face glowing in the evening light. "I felt something the day he died. Fey, I think, the word is. I knew that night he would not come back to me in mortal flesh. I said _vaya con Dios_ to him as he left, and truly, he has gone with God."

_Fey I think, the word is. _Johnny drew in a deep breath, feeling rattled. That was the same word Andy had said to him before Johnny had left for the Sirrus, and the Kid had died. "He wore your letter on his breast pocket, a J. He never told anybody what it was, however much we tried to guess. The day he died, he took me aside and gave me the paper with your name and address. Told me to come and find you."

"You are a good friend, Johnny Nicholls. I read the story of the _H.M.S Ulysses_ in the papers; the story of the ship with its mutineer crew, its dramatic and tragic end. I read too, the letters Andrew wrote to me; of the ordinary men he lived with on the ship; of the conditions in the arctic sea, what the admiralty demanded of these men. I can see now, having read both, the extraordinary things these ordinary men did."

Johnny was silent as her words sunk in. _Just like you, Andy old man, _he thought amusedly. A cheerful, devil-may-care veneer, with foundations of perception and love and truth underneath. _And just like your girl too, to pick up on the hints and put two and two together; perceptive, and intelligent._

"He was always happy" she said suddenly. He told me stories of garden parties and yachting with you, and stories of times on board your ship. Can you tell me too?"

So Johnny sat back on the long low swing, face hidden in the lengthening shadows, and told her stories of Andrew and him, and also, the story of the _H.M.S Ulysses. _All the while he watched the expressions dance across her face; the sensitive curve of mouth as she agreed with some point or declaimed her sympathy; he felt her quick and agile mind as she argued some point vehemently; and realised why the Kapok Kid loved this woman, and loved this place.

This woman was a treasure, and this home and her family were treasures too, anchors for Andrew Carpenter, the aristocrat who had given his life to the sea and the Navy, who had craved simplicity and love. Johnny Nicholls, the stubborn Highlander, alone and broken, craved the very same things, and he could have them now.

He believed he could love this girl â€" this half-Spanish, half â€"British woman, with the beautiful brown eyes, small lithe body, and kind, deep sensitive nature, as well as he could love anything, and grow to love her more, if possible, in years to come.

The shadows lengthened and they rose reluctantly from their seat. "You know" Johnny Nicholls smiled, as he watched the last evening light linger on Juanita's wavy brown tresses as they made their way slowly up to the house, "Andy once told me that the best treasures are found in Henley? And do you know, I think he's absolutely right."

Fin.

End
file.